

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in the UK

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Introduction

The report offers a summary of some of the developments and issues in the UK about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion. The period from March 2020 to May 2022¹ was marked by a series of shifts and changes in government policies and approaches to Covid restrictions, often characterised in public discussions as being ‘too messy’, or ‘too stringent’ or ‘too late’. The report also outlines some of the ways in which Covid-related bans and restrictions, together with their subsequent easing, were facilitated and contested by religious institutions and organisations. Geographical differences in how the pandemic was tackled in four nations presents further difficulties in painting a simple picture of the UK context. The report considers some of the regional divergences and includes additional links for further information. With much work currently undertaken on the topic by academic researchers and religious and community organisations, the report provides only a snapshot of key issues and studies that emerged in relation to religion and the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. General Presentation

The UK experience of managing the Covid-19 pandemic reveals a complex and often contradictory picture, with confusing sets of health protection statutory legislations and guidance. Health is a devolved issue in the UK and, therefore, there are some regional differences in the character and timescale of implementing various sets of restrictions and individual pieces of legislation.

The virus began to circulate in March 2020 which led to an incremental introduction of public health measures to mitigate its impact. Health measures included a series of national lockdowns, followed by an easing of restrictions and their subsequent re-introduction. Key restrictions affected social gatherings and religious practices, particularly as places of worship were closed or ordered to introduce social distancing measures and limit the number of worshippers. Religious ceremonies and festivals were cancelled, and religious rituals (including funerals, marriages, and baptisms) could not be performed as before.

Religious worship and congregational activities were curtailed during the lockdown periods under the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) Regulations](#) that came into force on 26 March 2020. In line with Regulation 5, places of worship were kept closed during the emergency period, except for exceptional uses permitted that included funerals, broadcast of an act of worship or provision of essential voluntary services or urgent public support (e.g. food banks, blood donation

¹ May 2022 is chosen because this is when some of the last remaining restrictions have been lifted to date. Wales was the last country to relax the rules.

sessions). During the emergency period, no gatherings were allowed of more than two people (Regulation 7), with a small number of exceptions allowed. Table 1 summarises key restrictions and their impact on places of worship.

Table 1: Key dates and restrictions impacting places of worship

Key dates	Lockdowns and main restrictions	Impact on places of worship
26 Mar 2020	<u>First national lockdown</u> : all 'non-essential' high street businesses were closed, and people were permitted to leave home for essential purposes only.	Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the nation, calling for the closure of all places of worship.
13 May 2020	People were allowed to leave home for outdoor recreation (beyond exercise).	The government set up a task force to look at how to safely reopen places of worship.
1 Jun 2020	People were permitted to meet outside in groups of up to six people.	UK Government's first step regarding the reopening of places of worship were to work closely with faith leaders to open for individual or private prayer in July.
4 Jul 2020	Most lockdown restrictions were lifted and gatherings up to 30 people were legally permitted.	Places of worship were to reopen for prayer and services, including weddings with a maximum of 30 people, all subject to social distancing rules.
14 Sept 2020	Restrictions for gathering in England were tightened. People were again legally prohibited from meeting more than six people socially - indoors and outdoors.	Places of worship were able to stay open for communal worship and could host numbers larger than six for communal worship.
14 Oct 2020	The Government rationalised local restrictions by introducing a 'three tier system'.	Under each alert level, places of worship were permitted to remain open with certain restrictions.
5 Nov 2020	<u>Second national lockdown</u> : non-essential high street businesses were closed, and people were prohibited from meeting those not in their "support bubble" inside.	Places of worship were permitted to open only for the purposes of independent prayer, for funerals or funeral commemorative events, to broadcast an act of worship, to provide essential voluntary services or urgent public support services, for registered childcare, and to host permitted gatherings.
2 Dec 2020	The tiered system was reintroduced with modifications.	Places of worship were permitted to re-open for collective worship, in line with different restrictions in each tier level
30 Dec 2020	75% of the country was placed under tier four restrictions. The tier four rules were like those imposed during the second national lockdown.	
6 Jan 2021	<u>Third national lockdown</u> was introduced: People were once again told to stay at home but could still form support bubbles (if eligible) and some gatherings were exempted from the gatherings	People were allowed to attend places of worship for a service but could not mingle with anyone outside of their household or support bubble.

	ban (for example, religious services and some small weddings were permitted).	
8 Mar 2021	England began a phased exit from the lockdown.	Further relaxations of rules, provided places of worship adhere to health and safety rules.

Public debates and discussions about religion during the pandemic focused on health risks, religious freedoms, inequalities, and vaccines distribution and hesitancy.

Some of the points of interest included:

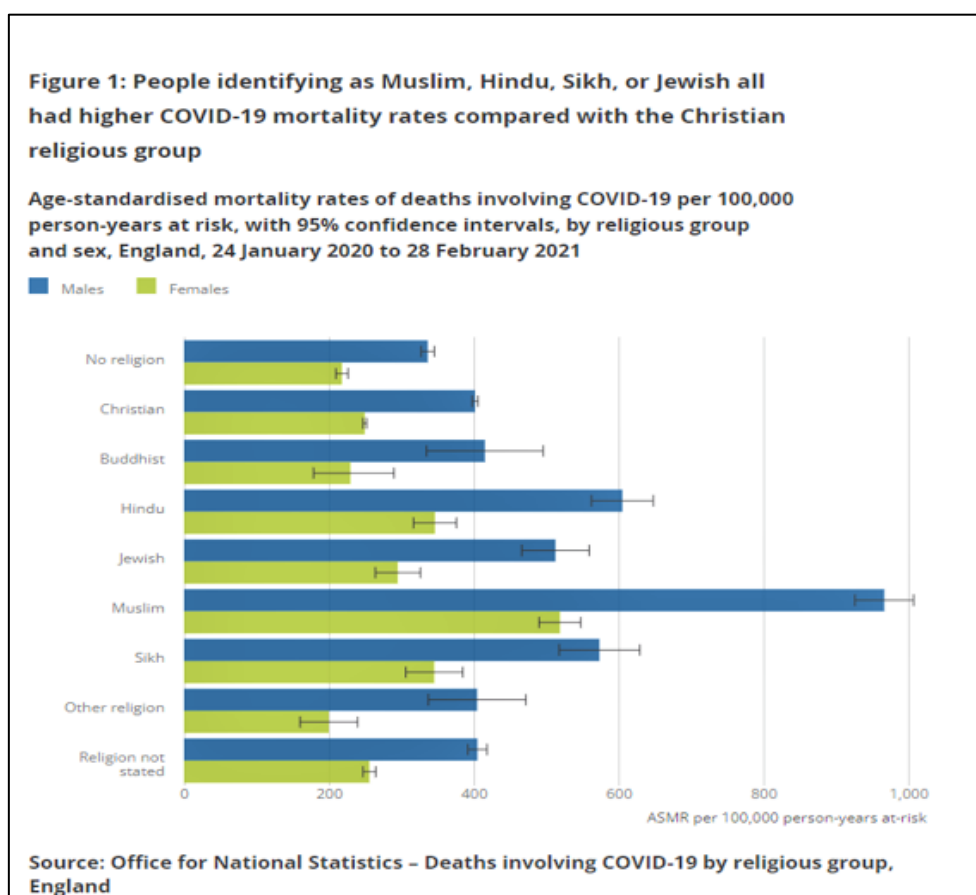
- safeguarding members of religious groups from increased physical and mental risks of the coronavirus and keeping places of worship and community centres safe
- protecting freedom of religion and belief from restrictive health and social distancing measures
- tackling persisting health and social inequalities in the context of disproportionate impact of the pandemic on religious and ethnic minorities, including high death rates
- understanding and measuring vaccine uptake and (mis)information

Faith-based organisations developed reports which included surveys and statistical research to measure and better understand the impact of the Covid pandemic on their religious communities. For example, a report about '[Churches, Covid-19 And Communities](#)' was produced by the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at University of York to examine how churches responded to the pandemic and supported national and local decision-making. The research collected 5,500 survey responses and interviews with church leaders, members and non-members in the period of Autumn 2020 and February-March 2021. It presented evidence on some of the developing responses by churches, including new partnerships with other bodies.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), a key umbrella organisations for Muslim communities, produced a report entitled '[Together in Tribulation: British Muslims and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)'. Their research focused on the ways in which Muslim communities were impacted by COVID-19 and their active participation in national efforts to tackle the pandemic. Some of the preliminary conclusions included the 'need for collective leadership and strong coordination between different sectors and service providers of Muslim communities', and provisions to ensure that 'every segment of British Muslim society is aware of and understands the public health messaging in order to keep safe' ([MCB 2020c, p.58](#)).

Another set of studies focused on how the pandemic exacerbated ethnic and religious inequalities, particularly in relation to disproportionately high death figures from Covid in religious and ethnic minorities. [Routen et al \(2021\)](#) found that during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic it was increasingly difficult to conduct religious practices after death in all ethnic groups, while in ethnic minorities, the impact appeared greater. A report from [Public Health England \(2020\)](#) uncovered that ethnic minorities experienced some of the worst impacts of the pandemic. The [MCB \(2020b\)](#) and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research ([Boyd 2020](#)) noted that members of their communities had very high mortality rates. There were also concerns that some members from the Haredi Jewish community did not follow government advice on social distancing because of their limited engagement with mainstream media and the lack of information. Although this led to the spread of the disease and elevated mortality ([Gaskell et al 2021](#)), according to [Staetsky \(2020\)](#), the latter had only a small input into the overall picture of mortality of British Jews.

The following graph from the [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk) illustrates that people from religious minorities groups had higher Covid-19 mortality rates.



2. Legal Aspect

Key legislations and Covid-related restrictions

There are key primary legislations that provided emergency powers about health protection in the pandemic in the UK. Some legislations, particularly regarding the nature and timing of health restrictions differ on the regional level. The following table captures Covid statutory legislations (column 2) and regulations aimed at putting these into practice (column 3) for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Table 2: Key Primary legislations and Covid-related restrictions

Country	Emergency powers: coronavirus and health protection	Current restrictions (if still in place)
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coronavirus Act 2020 (c. 7) Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 (c. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No longer in place

Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coronavirus Act 2020 (c. 7) • Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 (c. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 5) (Wales) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020/1609) • The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Functions of Local Authorities etc.) (Wales) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020/1011)
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coronavirus Act 2020 (c. 7) • Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 (asp 7) • Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Act 2020 (asp 10) • Public Health etc. (Scotland) Act 2008 (asp 5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel and Operator Liability) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (S.S.I. 2021/322) • The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (S.S.I. 2021/277)
Northern Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coronavirus Act 2020 (c. 7) • Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 (c. 36) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No longer in place

Guidance for the safe use of places of worship

As places of worship were allowed to reopen, specific guidance was created for the worshipers and those responsible for keeping the premises and venues safe. These included steps to:

- reduce the risk of transmission
- hygiene advice
- handling shared objects and communal resources
- singing together and social activities

With health policy decisions devolved to the regional level, some of the guidance differed and was changed or withdrawn at different speeds. This can be summarised as follows:

Table 3: Specific Guidance for the safe use of places of worship in four nations

Country	Guidance	Status
England	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship	Withdrawn on 29 March 2022
Wales	https://gov.wales/alert-level-0-guidance-employers-businesses-and-organisations	Last Updated 31 May 2022
Scotland	https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/	Last Updated 2 March 2022
Northern Ireland	https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-places-worship	No date available

Easing restrictions: face masks and 'test and trace' system on religious premises

Government guidance about wearing face masks and testing for virus in places of worship provides a good illustration of different application of the rules on the regional level, particularly as some of these restrictions were being removed as there were growing hopes by the government and chief medical advisors that the disease would become endemic. England adopted a more relaxed approach, with the legal limits on the numbers of people allowed to meet being removed and the government advising that 'social distancing in a place of worship is now a personal choice' ([Ministry of Housing and Local Government 2020](#)). Scotland and Wales were more cautious about reopening and getting rid of some of the precautions.

- In England, there is currently no requirement to socially distance or wear a mask in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. In Scotland, from 9 August 2021, there were no limits on people gatherings or social distance, but face masks were still required till April 2022 ([BBC News, 18 April 2022](#)). In Wales, face coverings and masks are no longer required in places of worship, but there is still a strong recommendation from the Welsh government to wear masks even if there is no legal obligation ([Public Health Wales 29 March 2022](#)).
- In England there has been no legal requirement for places of worship to keep a record of visitors as part of the 'test and trace' system from February 2022. However, in Scotland, places of worship still could continue to collect visitor details in support of the NHS Scotland Test and Protect. In Wales, churches can still take the details of people who attend places of worship if required.

Legal challenges to closing places of worship during the lockdowns

(i) England and Wales – November 2020

A group of church leaders has launched a claim for a judicial review of the English and Welsh governments' decisions to close churches during the second lockdown in November 2020. A [legal challenge](#) over the ban on communal worship was launched with 122 church leaders from different streams and traditions pursuing legal action against the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. They argued that the 'restrictions on public worship [...] breached article 9 of the European convention on human rights which protects the right to freedom of religion and that the decision to ban worship services during the second lockdown was unlawful' ([Sherwood, 14 November 2020](#)).

(ii) Scotland - February 2021

As was noted earlier in the report, a devolved approach to health meant that introduction and easing of restrictions in four nations went at different speeds. For example, in February 2021, Scottish worshippers still faced criminal penalties for going to church while their English counterparts were allowed to attend as long as safety measures were in place. A legal action over the closures of churches was subsequently raised by a Catholic priest from St Alphonsus' Church in Glasgow which resulted in a judicial review. His actions were directed at stopping a north-south divide on the right to worship during lockdown and were supported by the ADF International, the faith-based legal organisation seeking to protect supporting religious freedoms ([Williams 2021](#)). The Scottish Government claimed that the ban was in place to protect public health, with lockdown rules only permitting weddings or funerals. However, lawyers for the faith representatives argued the regulations were in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Scottish Constitution.

The case was heard by Lord Braid alongside an action raised by 27 other Christian leaders, including the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland, and the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), who are supported by Christian Concern. What is interesting, however, was that the Church of Scotland did not support the legal action and the individual religious representatives were ‘speaking for themselves’ ([Davidson 2021](#)). Lord Braid ruled that the regulations went further than was lawfully allowed, which meant that churches, but also mosques, synagogues and temples could open with immediate effect. Cannon White was delighted to hear that ‘the court has understood the essential need to protect not only the physical and material health of our society but also its spiritual needs and therefore overturned the disproportionate, unnecessary and unlawful blanket ban on public worship’ ([BBC Scotland, 24 March 2021](#)).

3. Social aspect

Covid restrictions and key developments in state-religion engagement

The relations between the state and religious groups during the pandemic could be best described as ‘complicated.’ On the one hand, there was a strong sense of collaboration in seeking to protect society and worshippers from health risks and develop safe places of worship. [Cranmer and Pocklington \(2020, p.9\)](#) suggest that this common approach demonstrated a ‘voluntary surrender of certain aspects of religious liberty in pursuit of the common good during a global health emergency’. In the beginning of the pandemic, and particularly during the first lockdown, some religious organisations introduced restrictions earlier than they became officially required. There were also ongoing discussions between government officials and religious leaders to reiterate their ongoing commitment to ‘meet[ing] the challenges posed by the pandemic, both in the UK and internationally’ ([Gledhill 2020](#)).

On the other hand, there was a growing sense fatigue with restrictions during the second lockdown in November 2020. England’s senior faith leaders, represented at the government’s ‘Places of Worship Taskforce’, challenged the government’s decision to ban communal worship, claiming that there was no scientific basis for the move. Drawing on their earlier efforts to support communities throughout the pandemic, they maintained that their ‘commitment to care for others [came] directly from our faith, which must be sustained and strengthened by our meeting together in common worship’ ([Sherwood 2020a](#)).

The [interfaith letter](#) included a series of points highlighting the importance and benefits of public religious services as well as showcasing the ways in which faith organisations have contributed to tackling the pandemic.

The points were grouped under the following rubrics (see [full text](#) for further details):

- Public Worship is Covid-19 secure
- Public Worship is essential to sustain our service
- Public Worship is necessary for social cohesion and connectedness
- Public Worship is important for the Mental Health of our nation
- Public Worship is an essential sign of hope

At the same time, the MCB called for an urgent review of new lockdown restrictions imposed on places of worship as its leaders argued that the government’s inadequate consultation and poor engagement with faith communities remained a problem ([MCB Press Release 1 November 2020](#)).

Further tensions emerged around the easing of restrictions in June 2020, when the UK government announced a gradual reopening of places of worship for individual prayer and ‘for limited permitted activities, in a manner that is safe and in line with national lockdown restrictions’ ([Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2020](#)). Religious leaders were split over reopening places of worship in England. While church leaders welcomed the move to reopen, Jewish and Muslim representatives criticised the government’s hasty announcement on the grounds that it lacked religious literacy and was not appropriate for how they practiced their faith. [Chief Rabbi Mirvis \(2020\)](#) wrote that ‘different religious communities must apply the government’s advice in a suitable manner at their own pace, so that it is safe in their own context’. Harun Khan, the secretary general of the MCB, urged the government to ‘give clear and unambiguous guidance’ for Muslim communities about opening for private worship so that ‘mosque trustees, staff, volunteers [...] [would] plan effectively to ensure the safety and wellbeing of everyone’ ([MCB 2020b](#)).

Shifts in religious practices and religiosity patterns

During the pandemic religious groups were affected by restrictions on public gathering, which was particularly damaging to funeral arrangements and celebrations of marriages and baptisms. However, some bans on religious practices and rituals which threatened public health and increased the spread of infection created different challenges for various faith communities.

For Christian denominations, Holy Communion was adversely affected by health measures. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York advised priests to suspend the use of the shared chalice as well as physical contact during the sharing of the peace. Instead, they advised to ‘offer Communion in one kind only to all communicants i.e. the consecrated bread/wafer/host, with the priest alone taking the wine’ ([Church of England, 10 March 2020](#)). Muslim and Jewish communities had to suspend their traditional funeral rituals of mourning, including washing, embalming, and using other forms of preparations for burial as these entailed close personal contact. For example, Rabbi Daniel Epstein noted that ‘where Covid-19 has been the cause of death, *tahara* – the Jewish ritual of preparing a body for burial by washing, reciting prayers and psalms, and dressing it in a shroud – has not been performed’ ([Sherwood and Pidd 2020](#)). Some burial services had to be conducted over Zoom and the custom of sitting shiva (week-long mourning period in Judaism for first-degree relatives) was suspended.

Religious communities were also forced to cancel religious festivals and adapt their rituals and celebrations to social distancing restrictions and limits on the number of people allowed to gather. For example, Muslim communities could not have usual festivities during the Ramadan month in 2021 because large indoor gatherings and eating together with family and friends were prohibited. In May 2021, the MCB produced guidance for staying safe that included ‘meeting outdoors or virtually’ and ‘enjoying a home-cooked dinner at home or outdoors’ ([MCB, Press Release, 10 May 2021](#)).

A growing body of research and surveys examined social and psychological effects of the pandemic on religious beliefs and practices. For example, in January 2021, an online discussion organised by the Religion Media Centre on the impact of Covid-19 on religious attendance and affiliation in Britain, concluded that the lockdowns and restrictions might result in more nominal religious followers losing the habit of religious practicing and abandoning the faith ([Wyatt 2021](#)).

[Village and Francis \(2021\)](#) examined the impact of the Covid pandemic on the clergy and churches, with the ‘Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey’ launched on 22 January 2021 to assess the ranges of services and ministry offered by churches. The research included data and analysis of the impact of the pandemic on personal wellbeing, religious life, attitudes towards virtual services and towards Holy Communion post-pandemic.

Another study on Christian groups in the UK and the US found some interaction effects between anxiety about the coronavirus and prior religiosity and a change in religious beliefs. While believers with strong beliefs, but also strong anxiety about the coronavirus increased religious beliefs, non-believers remained more sceptic about religion ([Rigoli 2021, p. 2206](#)).

Developing virtual spaces and online services

With places of worship ordered to close, religious groups engaged in developing virtual services, including celebrations and ceremonies on Zoom and online religious and social activities for their members. In the summer of 2020, researchers at Durham University explored the spiritual life and religious activity of the UK online and offline, using the data from Savanta ComRes. They found that one in four people in the UK regularly engaged in online organised worship during the lockdown. Their research showed that British public and particularly younger generations were keen to engage in online or hybrid forms of religion ([Philips 2020](#)).

Many churches and synagogues moved their liturgies and activities online. For example, synagogues which are part of Liberal Judaism movement streamed their services and events ([Frot 2020](#)). According to the press release by the [Church of England \(2021\)](#), their 'national online services [...] attracted more than 3.7 million views' over the year from the start of the pandemic, which triggered 'a major change in the way Christians worship and reach out to their neighbours.'

However, social inequalities and digital poverty limited public access to online services and activities. The closure of places of worship strongly affected the poorest and oldest members of the faith communities as they struggled to access virtual services and felt increasingly isolated. At the same time, research undertaken by the LSE's Religion and Global Society Unit about the impact of Covid on young Londoners' religiosity found that '[a]pproximately 72% of respondents reported that the pandemic changed the way they practised their faith, with many adopting new private religious practices in the home or joining services online' ([Bhambra and Tiffany 2021](#)). Despite an easy access to religious content, their participants often felt fatigued by 'one-sided worship' online (*Ibid*).

Faith-based organisations often act as state allies in helping some of the most vulnerable members in local neighbourhoods by offering welfare support and food services, with many churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples acting as important drop-in centres and community hubs ([O'Toole and Braginskaia 2016](#)). The closure of premises meant that some of the food provisions had to be changed to food deliveries and clothes banks and advice surgeries cancelled or moved outside wherever possible. For example, United Synagogues had to scale down their work and operate their drop-in services out of one synagogue ([Frazer 2020](#)). With social distancing in place, service users could no longer visit the centre to enjoy a cooked meal or find essential items, so volunteers decided to 'pack up bags of clothing in the right sizes, shirts and trousers according to age groups, and hand them over' (*Ibid*).

Faith-based engagement in vaccination efforts

Although religious leaders contested some of the restrictions, religious organisations sought to adhere to public health measures and educate communities about the ways to prevent the spread of the virus. This was evident in the ways in which various groups got involved in the vaccination programme. In May 2021, the Office for National Statistics ([ONS 2021](#)) published a report on the first dose Covid-19 vaccination rates covering the period from 8 December 2020 to 12 April 2021. The highest rates of vaccination were returned by Christians (93.2%), Hindus (92.0%), Sikhs (91.9%), and Jews (91.8%), and the lowest by Buddhists (83.3%), other religion (81.4%), and Muslims (78.8%).

The [Interfaith Network](#) compiled a large resource of articles about faith-based efforts to boost vaccination efforts in their respective communities. In December 2020, the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) produced a detailed paper on the Pfizer and AstraZeneca Covid-19 Vaccine, which was later supported and promoted by the MCB. At the start of 2021, the Royal College of GPs ([Press Release 7 February 2021](#)) called for 'a high-profile national campaign, supported by faith leaders and popular public figures from black, Asian and ethnic minority communities to support the effort to increase COVID-19 vaccine uptake amongst groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the virus.' In December 2021, faith leaders joined forces with the government to support the delivery of vaccines, with many places of worship becoming key vaccination hubs and strong partners for the NHS, including temples, churches, and mosques.

In light of the current wave of new Covid cases and in spite of the best efforts to ensure that the disease becomes endemic, it is difficult to say to what extent some of the above-discussed measures and challenges remain temporary and what particular services and new modes of working, such as online services, will be transformed into everyday religious practices.

4. Additional Resources

[Guardian Picture Essay](#) provides an interesting account of how religious officials and laypeople across many faiths adapted to the closure of their places of worship and created solutions to the issue of socially distanced worship and community togetherness.

[FaithAction](#) is a national network of faith-based organisations. During the pandemic they created a very useful set of [videos discussions with various religious groups](#) about particular issues and best practices to address Covid, including perspectives from [Christian](#), [Jewish](#), [Muslim](#), [Sikh](#), [Hindu](#) and [Buddhist](#) groups.

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